

GLORY DAYS

Esther Clifford

Redmaids' High School, Bristol

In the photo, the girl is smiling, but only just. It's caught in the corner of her mouth like something snagged on a line, oddly vulnerable. She's holding a pencil loosely between two fingers, other hand planted on the table in front of her, chaotic with loose sheets and miscellaneous stationery. The sun slants through a window behind her, grainy through the sepia tint of the photograph, a transmission of living light across frozen time. In this distorted haze, the girl keeps her eyes fixed on the kitchen table, allowing only the slightest tilt of her head in the direction of the boy on her left.

In the photo, the boy stares at the girl. There are a full mug and a largely empty exercise sheet in front of him. He's young. They both are. In the photo, he's tilting towards her, chair swinging precariously on two legs, endlessly approaching the event horizon, the point of no return. He's talking, animated, eyes blown wide and one gangly arm flung away from his body in the process of gesticulating with an absurd dynamic enthusiasm tangible even through dead paper. His outstretched hand is inches from the mug. In the photo, it's still possible that it won't fall. The outcomes splinter, contorting, warping the image in a strange whorl of light. The disaster hasn't happened yet, in the photo. Things remain whole.

'The funny thing is, I don't even remember who took the photograph.'

The woman is sitting in a cafe with her sister, holding a telegram in one hand and a picture in the other.

'I remember that day because I was so worried about this maths test, I hadn't slept. That's coffee in the mug.'

She points.

'I wasn't allowed to be drinking it.'

Her sister stays carefully silent.

'You can see on the wall where we ran out of money for paint.'

'He was drafted a week later.'

At the table next to them, a couple are getting engaged.

'That was the last time I saw him.'

Outside, it sounds like victory.